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# MEASURING HAMLET SECURITY IN VIETNAM

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## REPORT

OF A

## SPECIAL STUDY MISSION

BY

Honorable JOHN V. TUNNEY (California)

OF THE

## COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PURSUANT TO THE PROVISIONS OF

H. Res. 179

90TH CONGRESS

A RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS TO CONDUCT THOROUGH STUDIES AND INVESTIGATIONS OF ALL MATTERS COMING WITHIN THE JURISDICTION OF SUCH COMMITTEE

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# FOREWORD

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
*Washington, D.C., December 1968.*

This report has been submitted to the Committee on Foreign Affairs by Hon. John V. Tunney, who undertook a special study mission to Vietnam during the period May 17 to 29, 1968.

The findings in this report are those of Representative Tunney and do not necessarily reflect the views of the membership of the full Committee on Foreign Affairs.

THOMAS E. MORGAN, *Chairman.*

## LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

*December 23, 1968.*

Hon. THOMAS E. MORGAN,
*Chairman, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Washington, D.C.*

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN: I was on a special study mission to Vietnam during May 1968, on behalf of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

The system used to measure hamlet security has assumed importance because the conclusions are used to inform and guide persons at the highest levels of our Government. Since there has not been a public study of this "Hamlet Evaluation System" to my knowledge, I have made it the subject of my report, which I hope will be useful to you, the members of your committee, and the Congress.

Sincerely yours,

JOHN V. TUNNEY,
*Member of Congress.*

# CONTENTS


| | Page |
|---|---|
| Foreword | III |
| Letter of transmittal | V |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Methodology | 3 |
| The HES worksheet | 3 |
| Faults: | |
| Averaging | 4 |
| Information gathering | 6 |
| Short tours | 6 |
| Training | 6 |
| Fieldwork | 7 |
| Unreliable informants | 7 |
| Garbage in, garbage out | 8 |
| Conclusion | 9 |
| Appendix | 10 |

91ST CONGRESS } HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES { REPORT
*1st Session* } { No. 91–25

# MEASURING HAMLET SECURITY IN VIETNAM

FEBRUARY 25, 1969.—Committed to the Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union and ordered to be printed

Mr. TUNNEY, from the Committee on Foreign Affairs, submitted the following

## REPORT

[Pursuant to a resolution (H. Res. 179, 90th Cong.) authorizing the Committee on Foreign Affairs to conduct thorough studies and investigations coming within the jurisdiction of such committee]

# INTRODUCTION

During the past 3 years, I have been concerned along with most other Americans about the validity of the information we have been receiving on the political situation in Vietnam. On numerous occasions, I have been present when Presidential advisers have briefed Members of the Congress and told them that a certain percentage, usually carried to one or two decimal places, of the South Vietnamese people were living in relatively secure areas under the control of the Saigon government. I found it difficult to believe that such a precise evaluation of the political sympathies of rural people could be made; yet this information was being used at the highest levels of the U.S. Government as a guide to operational planning and as a means of informing the American people on the progress in the war.

Just recently, the American people read in their newspapers on December 11, 1968, that 73.3 percent of the population of South Vietnam had been brought under the Saigon government's control. In less than 6 weeks' time—the interval from the last previous report—there had been an increase of 6.5 percent, up from 66.8 to 73.3 percent. These are the same kind of optimistic statistics we were receiving a year ago just before the catastrophic Tet offensive occurred. Like most other Americans, I had taken Ambassador Bunker's statement of November 17, 1967, that two-thirds of the South Vietnamese people were under government control, at its face value. How then could the Tet offensive have occurred if things were going so well? To me the Tet offensive suggested that no area of South Vietnam was thoroughly secure and under Saigon's control. In the aftermath of the Tet offensive I was left with so many doubts about the real strength of Saigon's political support in the Vietnamese countryside, that I decided to go to Vietnam to find out for myself.

When I got to Vietnam I learned that these apparently scientifically precise statistics on Saigon's political strength had been derived by a procedure known as the hamlet evaluation system (HES). This information gathering system was instituted nearly 3 years ago by former Deputy Ambassador Robert Komer, a former special assistant to President Johnson and a former high official of the CIA. It consists of a monthly computer tabulation of reports on the state of Saigon's control over each of the 12,650 hamlets in South Vietnam. Only 8,650 hamlets are actually evaluated since 4,000 are considered under permanent Vietcong control. These reports are prepared by U.S. military officers in the field who are responsible for the implementation of the American-sponsored "pacification" program, Saigon's primary means for bringing the 60 percent of South Vietnamese people who are peasant rice farmers under their control. Although the Saigon government probably has figures of its own which indicate a purely Vietnamese assessment of Government control in the countryside, they are never

reported in the United States. Instead, we have to rely on American evaluations of Saigon's political strength.

In a farewell news conference in Saigon on November 3, 1968, just prior to his departure from Vietnam to become the new U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, Mr. Komer released the latest results from the pacification program. They showed that in just eight months Saigon had fully recovered from the setback suffered by the Tet offensive in February. Mr. Komer said that 66.8 percent of South Vietnam's population was living in relatively secure areas, while only 16.8 percent were living in Viet Cong controlled hamlets and the remainder, or 16.4 percent, were in so-called contested areas. The Ambassador also reported that if the present trends in pacification held good then something over 70 percent of South Vietnam's population would be in the relatively secure category by the end of 1968. His prognosis proved accurate when his successor, William E. Colby, announced on December 11, 1968, that 73.3 percent of the population fell into the relatively secure category. In anticipation of such promising indications of progress Mr. Komer had declared that Saigon "is definitely winning the pacification war," a fact which he believed, "would help determine the shape of a settlement at Paris."

Since the concept of pacification is based on the dubious premise that Government control results in political loyalty, reports of progress in pacification continue to be misleading for both the American people and policymakers in Washington. In an address before the Overseas Press Club in New York on November 17, 1967, the American Ambassador to Saigon, Mr. Ellsworth Bunker, emphasized that the principal indication of progress being made in Vietnam was to be found in the pacification program. "In a war with as many faces as that in Vietnam," he said, "one of the best indications of how things are progressing is the degree of security in the countryside." Admitting that "Obtaining a definitive assessment of the extent of security is an extremely complex task," Ambassador Bunker nevertheless asserted that "It is our judgment that the proportion of the population under reasonably secure protection of the Government of Vietnam has increased to more than two-thirds of the 17 million people in South Vietnam. Just over 2 years ago, it is estimated that the proportion was about one-half. Of the one-third not under Government protection today, about half are under Viet Cong control and half in contested areas."

With such seemingly authoritative judgments as this fixed in their minds, the American people were shocked when the Tet offensive of February 1968 revealed that virtually no area of Vietnam could be accorded dependable protection by Saigon. The word "protection" in the Ambassador's report must have been a euphemism for Saigon's governmental presence and an attempted political control over the countryside. As I discovered when I went to Vietnam, these official evaluations of areas under Government protection were normally rudimentary assessments of regions which officials could visit in daylight with a relative sense of safety. They were not indicators of popular loyalties, nor were they estimates of the way in which the people would turn when they confronted a choice of either joining a Viet Cong guerrilla team or of facing the consequences of informing on them.

## Methodology

The method American officers use to assess the degree of the Saigon government's control in the Vietnamese countryside is called the hamlet evaluation system (HES). It was instituted by the U.S. mission in Saigon in 1966 because earlier estimates of political control made by both Vietnamese and Americans did not contain the statistical information American officials felt they needed. The new system is entirely run by Americans, and, while it is ostensibly a report on Saigon's performance, the responsibilities Americans have assumed in attempting to control the rural areas makes it in effect a judgment on the way we are approaching the war.

The system consists of 18 separate standards organized into six groups under the two general categories of security and development. Theoretically, each of Vietnam's 12,650 hamlets is evaluated on a basis of these criteria once a month. Although it is the primary subdivision of a village, the hamlet is not a naturally distinct social unit but has traditionally been only a separate area of habitation for people who were an integral part of the village. Over the years of the war, the social cohesion of the village has steadily deteriorated with the result that it is no longer an effective unit for common action throughout Vietnam. Instead of trying to rebuild the cohesion of the village, American programs—starting with the ill-fated "Strategic Hamlet"—have emphasized the distinctiveness of the hamlet and thus accentuated an already difficult problem of social fragmentation in the Vietnamese countryside. A measure of the control over hamlets is therefore an admission that centralized administration can no longer begin at the village.

## The HES Worksheet

An example of the hamlet evaluation worksheet used by American officers in assessing the state of Government control in the rural areas will be found in appendix No. 1. A summary of this worksheet emphasizing the 18 criteria organized into six major subjects which are used for determining hamlet security and welfare is as follows:

### SECURITY

I. Viet Cong military activities:
   1. Village guerrilla unit.
   2. External forces.
   3. Military incidents affecting hamlets.

II. Viet Cong political subversive activities:
   4. Hamlet infrastructure.
   5. Village infrastructure.
   6. Activities affecting hamlet.

III. Security (friendly capabilities):
   7. Hamlet defense plan and organization.
   8. Friendly external force assistance.
   9. Internal security activities.

DEVELOPMENT

IV. Administrative and political activities:
    10. GVN government management.
    11. Census grievance information.
    12. Information/psyop activities.
V. Health, education, and welfare:
    13. Medical services and sanitation.
    14. Education.
    15. Welfare.
VI. Economic development:
    16. Self-help activity.
    17. Public works.
    18. Economic improvement programs.

In order to standardize the evaluation process, each hamlet is rated according to a five-point scale which consists of statements of condition about the 18 criteria. Ranging from "A" (the best) to "E" (the worst), these statements describe conditions that are regarded as typical of the spectrum of circumstances existing in hamlets which are not actually under permanent NLF control and which therefore fall into another category. For example, under the first criterion, "village guerrilla unit," the range of possible conditions runs from "A" which means, "village guerrilla remnants driven out. No threat of harassment or intimidation from guerrillas in adjacent villages," to "E" which means, "village guerrilla combat effective though some identified or eliminated. VC village defense largely intact." In making his assessment, the American officer simply checks one of the five possible evaluations beside each of the 18 criteria which most nearly expresses the situation in the hamlet. Once the 18 ratings have been made, the reporting officer averages them and assigns a grade as the overall evaluation of the hamlet's condition. These overall ratings, derived from the averaging process, have the following meanings:

| *Average score category:* | *Description* |
|---|---|
| A | Adequate security forces, infrastructure eliminated, public projects underway, economic picture improving. |
| B | Not immune to VC threat but security is organized and partially effective, infrastructure partially neutralized, self-help programs underway, and economic progress started. |
| C | Subject to infrequent VC harassment, infrastructure identified, some participation in self-help programs. |
| D | VC activities reduced but still an internal threat. Some VC terrorism and taxation. Some local participation in hamlet government and economic programs. Contested but leaning toward GVN. |
| E | VC are effective although some GVN control is evident. VC infrastructure intact. GVN programs are nonexistent or just beginning. |

## Faults

### AVERAGING

When American officials draw conclusions from this rating system, the hamlets designated in the A, B, or C category are considered "relatively secure" and those in the D and E groups are referred to as "con-

tested." It should be understood, however, that this procedure allows a hamlet to be called secure if it is in the C category even though this rating actually means that it is subject to guerrilla harassment. Why this overgeneralization of the evaluation categories is permitted was impossible for me to determine during my visit to Vietnam. But what was clear to me is that these generalizations of "relatively secure" and "contested" present a distorted view of the results of the hamlet evaluation system. They imply conditions not substantiated by the evidence in the evaluation. Why go to the trouble to make more careful assessments of the situation in the countryside if all these detailed judgments are going to be reported to the American people by lumping them into two general categories? And, since these two phrases, "relatively secure" and "contested," suggest a more favorable set of circumstances than is actually indicated by the evaluation process, the effect, if not the purpose, of their use is to mislead Americans about existing conditions in rural Vietnam.

Even worse, we have been led to believe that the statistics for the "relatively secure" and "contested" areas are systematically determined, but this is not the case. As misleading as they are, however, these semantic distortions are only a very minor source of the misrepresentations that can result from the evaluation system. More disturbing is the fact that, since all 18 indicators are given equal weight in the averaging process, it is possible to obtain a rating showing hamlets to be secure which are anything but secure and which have strong Viet Cong organizations. This means that even if all the correct information for all the criteria is gathered—a most unlikely situation because of the limitations of time and difficulties in preparation of the reporting officers—the validity of the data for purposes of analysis is lost by giving all indicators an equal weight in the averaging.

A careful scrutiny of the 18 criteria used in the evaluation process shows that the six entries for the Viet Cong hamlet and village infrastructure are less important statistically in determining the security of a hamlet than the other 12 categories on the list. This is true because all 18 criteria are given equal weight statistically in the tabulation. Yet the political organization known to Americans as "infrastructure" is in effect the first sign of the emergence of a revolutionary government in the village and it is the primary source of Saigon's difficulties in controlling the rural areas. If the incipient Communist-led revolutionary government were eliminated, then Saigon's agony would be ended and we would not have to employ massive firepower in an attempt to destroy it and we would not have to spend substantial amounts of money for welfare projects to attract people away from it. But the lesson of the last 4 years is that massive firepower or generous welfare cannot eliminate a Communist-led revolutionary movement that is built essentially on political loyalties and on access to positions of status and authority. The idea that in evaluating a hamlet's security only six of the 18 indicators should be concerned with this incipient revolutionary system, that all six should be of equal weight, and that in the averaging process the other 12 can more than counterbalance them in the overall assessment of the hamlet is an obvious source of misleading information and a conspicuous weakness of the evaluation procedure.

### INFORMATION GATHERING

In addition to these conspicuous shortcomings of the evaluation procedure, there are further glaring defects in the method of gathering the data which lead to other distortions in the resulting information. There are 12,650 hamlets in South Vietnam. Of these, nearly 4,000 are regarded as under permanent NLF control, leaving about 8,650 hamlets to be evaluated. This task is the responsibility of the 232 American officers who serve as advisers on local security to the Vietnamese chiefs of the 232 districts into which Vietnam is divided for administrative purposes. These Vietnamese chiefs, usually Army officers, are responsible for administration in the districts which are the level of government between the province at the top of the hierarchy and the villages on the bottom.

On an average, each of the 232 advisers—who are also responsible for the conduct of the American-sponsored pacification program—has 37 hamlets to evaluate each month. Of course, there is no such thing as an "average" number of hamlets for a district in South Vietnam: some have far fewer than 37; others two or three times more. The point is that even if, at the average, the American adviser were to gather with any degree of thoroughness the extensive information necessarily required to complete the hamlet evaluation worksheet, he would have virtually no time for his other pressing duties. Nevertheless, the district adviser or one of his two or three assistants is supposed to visit each hamlet in his district at least once each month. This schedule—requiring, if the average number of hamlets is 37, a visit to more than one hamlet per day—has proved impossible to achieve. I was told by district advisers in Vietnam that some hamlets are not visited for as long as 12 months. It should be borne in mind that the hamlet is evaluated every month even if it has not been visited by the adviser.

### SHORT TOURS

Other circumstances compound still further the weaknesses of the system. Since the normal tour of duty for American military men in Vietnam is 12 months, there are virtually no district advisers who have been able to develop a really close familiarity with the hamlets in their district. They are fortunate if they have been able to visit each hamlet at least once in their tours. My recent visit to Vietnam revealed that the American adviser had often served in some other capacity prior to assignment as a district adviser, leaving him less than 12 months to perform in that role.

### TRAINING

Besides shortness of tours, a lack of preparation was most frequently mentioned by advisers I talked with as a fundamental defect of the system. Of course, there is some training in the United States prior to assignment in Vietnam but this special advisory training is not given to everyone serving as district adviser or even the majority of them. Language instruction, one of the most critical forms of preparation for a successful advisory effort, is not uniform. Some men arrive in Vietnam nearly fluent in Vietnamese; others with a working vo-

cabulary, and the rest knowing only a few phrases. The advisers therefore are frequently obliged to work with interpreters in order to obtain the information required on the hamlet evaluation worksheet. This means that they do not get the information at firsthand but only through the interpretation of Vietnamese assistants. This is hardly a situation designed to insure accuracy of information. In Vietnam, the normal training for a district adviser consists of only 2 days' orientation in Saigon, and 1 day at the province capital. After his first 6 to 10 weeks in the district, the adviser returns to Saigon for a 1-week training and discussion period with senior officials of the U.S. mission concerned with pacification.

### FIELDWORK

The fieldwork as actually performed in evaluating a hamlet does not inspire confidence in the system, either. When the American officer arrives to evaluate a hamlet he wears a uniform and is usually accompanied by an interpreter. The persons questioned are selected at random, but the advisers say they get a large part of their information from the district, village, or hamlet chiefs. Although I have no special confirmation, it seems apparent that every hamlet resident has seen or heard what the Viet Cong do to persons who inform on them and later fall into their control. He knows that the Viet Cong may well be there long after the American is gone. This is the situation, then, in which the hamlet resident is approached by a U.S. officer who is apparently always in uniform and usually unable to speak Vietnamese. The hamlet dweller is asked such questions as whether the Viet Cong are in his hamlet at night, whether they have been identified, whether their apparatus is still functioning, and many other related questions. Can anyone honestly expect a Vietnamese peasant to risk his life in answering these inquiries when the person questioning him is a uniformed foreign soldier who does not even speak his own language and who will not be in the hamlet that night although the Viet Cong are likely to be?

### UNRELIABLE INFORMANTS

Besides a series of interviews with hamlet residents the other primary source of information for the uniformed district adviser is the district chief and his assistants, including the village and hamlet chiefs. Information from these officials must be viewed with a healthy skepticism. Since American officials must determine the state of security before they assign funds for local development, there is every incentive for local officials to convince their American counterparts of the high state of district security—especially since this "security" is required in order to qualify their area for development funds. Isn't it likely that a corrupt district chief is apt to mislead his American adviser about the security of the hamlets in the district in order to persuade the Americans to continue or increase the flow of supplies and funds for development purposes? Corruption aside, the district chief is unlikely to give answers which will lead to a diminution or suspension of American assistance. It is not realistic to expect him to act differently. How can any person be expected to gather and report information which will reflect badly on his performance or reduce his chances for financial power?

## Garbage In, Garbage Out

Under closer examination, the evaluation system becomes worse in practice than it is in theory. According to those men I talked with in South Vietnam, in the great majority of cases when the district adviser is replaced after serving an average of less than 12 months, he spends no time whatsoever with his successor. The information I received from the Department of Defense seems to confirm that this is the general rule rather than the exception. During his first 3 months, the new district adviser is orienting himself in order to be able to evaluate the hamlets properly. Advisers I talked with told me that they would often find that their predecessors had been overly optimistic in their reports and that honesty would require downgrading numerous hamlets. The problem, of course, is that the new adviser would have continued the old evaluation during his orientation period and would therefore be downgrading his own prior evaluation. One of those who found himself in this situation told me: "Congressman, I work a 110-hour week. I downgraded four hamlets after the February (Tet) offensive and was immediately hit with a barrage of cables from Saigon demanding a full explanation for downgrading them. For the next couple of weeks, I spent my time justifying my evaluation of the retrogression in those four hamlets. During that time, I wasn't doing the things I should have been doing. I believe I am an honest man, and although I hate to admit it, it may be a long time in hell before I downgrade another hamlet." This officer's dilemma reflects dramatically another of the built-in weaknesses of the system.

Even if the American advisers were not replaced so frequently, the evaluation system could not compensate for initial errors of judgment in evaluating the hamlet. The degree of accuracy of the evaluation would depend on the adviser's training, competency, language ability, and his access to other verifiable data for cross-checking his evaluation. If the system were used for some limited purpose—such as indicating gross changes in the effectiveness of Saigon's rural programs—it would have a useful function as long as its defects were recognized and taken into consideration by those using it. But when it is made to serve the grandiose objective of presuming to measure Saigon's political support in the countryside, it is misused and it is misued to the detriment of the American people.

This is particularly the case when a reporting officer visits some of his hamlets only once in each 12 months yet continues the previous evaluation unless he has some conspicuous reason—an incident of some sort—to change it. For as long as 12 months the evaluation for that hamlet may be totally unreliable though it will still be used in country-wide assessments of the performance of the Saigon government and the American-sponsored pacification program. Even in the hamlets that are visited more frequently, the adviser might spend less than 1 hour in gathering impressions about its conditions. One can only speculate on the accuracy of the observations where less than 1 hour is spent in a hamlet by an American officer untrained in data-gathering techniques, with little if any formal education in Vietnamese culture and traditions, and unable even to speak the local language. When such inaccurate data is fed into the computer, inaccurate data will come out. As they say in the computer trade, "garbage in, garbage out." The problem is the use to which the information will be put.

## Conclusion

Obviously, the most vital measure of success in Vietnam is the extent of political support that the Saigon government has among the people of the Vietnamese countryside. Few Americans, however, would expect these rural people to give their support to Saigon if, in return, they had no prospect of sharing in the power and authority of the Government. Any direct measurement of the extent of Saigon's political support and assessment of the share of power which peasant villagers have in the exercise of governmental authority in South Vietnam would, of course, require criteria which are substantially different from those now being used in the Hamlet Evaluation System. What the present system does measure is the effort by the Saigon government to establish administrative control over the rural areas through an American sponsored and financed "pacification" program. Left unchallenged is the implicit premise of this program that administrative control by Saigon can result in its receiving political support from the rural people. Yet, even as a measure of administrative control the Hamlet Evaluation System is distorted in Saigon's favor; only six of the 18 criteria used in evaluating a hamlet are direct measures of the Viet Cong's strength. And since all 18 criteria are weighted equally, Saigon goes into any evaluation with apparently a two-to-one margin in its favor.

Even more disturbing to me than the use of the distortion-prone criteria have been the methods employed in gathering information about conditions in rural Vietnam. A major obstacle is that the officers responsible for obtaining the facts about local security and welfare are the same men who are administering the pacification program. In effect, these American officials are being asked to evaluate their own performance. And no matter how high the integrity of the individual involved—and it is considerable—the resulting information is almost by definition subjective.

At virtually no other point in his military career will an officer be placed in the unfair situation of having officially to assess his own work. And given the enormous burdens of service in Vietnam and the purposes to which the information on results of pacification are put, this obviously is the wrong time to make an exception to a well-established precedent. Moreover, the data demanded by the evaluation system is so detailed, the reporting officer's competence in these matters so limited, and his term of service so brief that there is little hope of his obtaining accurate information. A double dilemma arises. Not only are these men having to pass judgment on their own work, but they are also required to gather data which they do not have the time or preparation to locate.

It is difficult, after studying the HES, to understand how our officials could have put so much uncritical faith in it in the face of opposing facts.

It reminds one of the lines in "Alice Through the Looking Glass":

> "There's no use trying," she said: "One can't believe impossible things."
>
> "I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."